

THE CORMORANTS OF SOUTH DAKOTA

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For a number of years Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus auritus*) have nested on the islands of Waubay Lake, Day County, South Dakota. Waubay Lake is about five miles northwest of the city of Webster. The islands on Waubay Lake are small. The east island contains about one acre. The west island is only about one-half this size. There are no trees so that the nests of cormorants are built on the rocky points or on the sandy soil.

Besides the cormorants, Ring-billed Gulls, Common Terns, and a few ducks may also be found nesting. The gulls number about two hundred pairs, the terns perhaps somewhat more than this.

The size of the cormorant colony has varied somewhat from year to year. Also the birds have shifted from one island to the other, depending on the depth of water, etc. The drouth of the past few years has undoubtedly forced many birds in other regions to hunt new grounds and many of these may have joined the Waubay Lake colony. In 1931 the colonies on the east and west islands on South Waubay Lake numbered at least seven hundred pairs. This is perhaps the largest colony of this species within the United States.

Young birds may be found in the nest from the middle of May until into September. New nests are built and birds hatched throughout the summer. I am inclined to believe that these late nests are built by birds that have had unsuccessful nesting elsewhere.

I have visited the colonies at least once during the nesting season for the past seven years. During the past three seasons, I have banded a number of the young. The returns show the range of the bird to be about as reported by Lewis.¹ Also one can not make a rule as to time of migration. Birds may be in South Dakota at the last of November or in Louisiana and Texas by October first.

In all I have banded 1175 cormorants. Each year I have tried to make a late visit to the colonies to check the birds which may die on the island. Nesting as closely as they do here a number of birds are killed each year because of crowding. When the birds are old enough to waddle out of the nest, I have found that if frightened the birds will bunch closely and those unfortunate enough to be under the pile die of suffocation. Twenty-six banded birds were found dead in the three years. I believe crowding to be the chief cause of their death.

¹Harrison T. Lewis, The Natural History of the Double-Crested Cormorant, Ottawa, Canada, 1929.



FIG. 56. The Double-crested Cormorant colony on the island in Waubay Lake, S. D. Photograph by the author.



FIG. 57. Closer view of the birds. Photograph by W. F. Kubichek.



FIG. 58. Various views in the Waubay cormorant colony. Photographs by W. F. Kubichek.

The hunter takes the greatest toll of cormorants. During the three years 169 birds have been reported dead by states as follows: South Dakota, 79; Minnesota, 19; Louisiana, 28; Iowa, 8; Nebraska, 3; Missouri, 7; Kansas, 3; Arkansas, 6; Tennessee, 1; Illinois, 3; Texas, 3; Oklahoma, 2; Mississippi, 3; Alabama, 1; Wisconsin, 1; Province of Manitoba, 1; Republic of Cuba, 1. I do not know whether the report from Cuba is unusual or not. I must admit I was somewhat surprised to receive it.

During the summer of 1929, birds were banded in the nest in June, July, and August. Looking over the notes it is apparent at a glance, that the reports of dead birds are much more numerous in the late banding of August birds.

The records show that 314 birds were banded in June. During the fall of 1929 and January of 1930 I find 34 of these reported dead, or 10.8 per cent of the number banded. In July, 61 were banded with 9 or 14.75 per cent dead that fall and winter. In August, 107 were banded with 36 or 33.64 per cent reported dead.

The recoveries from the June group were divided between nine states from South Dakota to Louisiana. The recoveries from the August group were as follows: South Dakota and South Dakota-Minnesota boundary lakes, 30; Arkansas, 2; Nebraska, 2; Oklahoma, 1; Louisiana, 1. Birds in the August group were killed in South Dakota from September 16 until November 28. The chain of lakes in eastern South Dakota is well known for its duck hunting so that there are many hunters in this area.

One may assume that many of the birds which were unable to fly when banded in August were but poor flyers when the hunting season opened on September 16. Also, these birds were not prepared to migrate and therefore were forced to run the gauntlet throughout most of the season in a heavily hunted region.

More than one-third of the August nestlings does seem to me a large number to shoot just for the fun of shooting.

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